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THE ROOF, THE STEEPLE AND THE PEOPLE

by Ralph Ellison

Bliss, Daddy Hickman said, you keep asking me to take you even though I keep telling you that folks dont like to see preachers hanging around a place they think of as one of the Devil's hangouts. All right, so now I'm going to take you so you can see for yourself, and you'll see that its just like the world—full of sinners and with a few believers, a few good folks and a heap of mixed-up and bad ones. Yes, and beyond the fun of sitting there looking at the marvelous happenings in the dark, there's all the same old snares and delusions we have to side-step everyday right out here in the bright sunlight. Because you see, Bliss, it's not so much a matter of where you *are* as what you *see*. . . .

Yes, sir, I said.

No, dont agree too quick, Bliss; wait until you understand. But like old Luke says, "The light of the body is the eye," so you want to be careful that the light that your eye lets into you isn't the light of darkness. I mean you always have to be sure that you *see* what you're looking at.

I nodded my head, watching his eyes. I could see him studying the Word as he talked.

That's right, he said, many times you will have to preach goodness out of badness, little boy. Yes, and hope out of hopelessness. God made the world and gave it a chance, and when it's bad we have to remember that it's still his plan for it to be redeemed through the striving of a few good women and men. So come on, we're going to walk down there and take us a good look. We're going to do it in style too, with some popcorn and peanuts and some crackerjacks and candy bars. You might as well get some idea of what you will have to fight against, because I dont believe you can really lead folks if you never have to face up to any of the temptations they face. Christ had to put on the flesh, Bliss; you understand?

Yes, sir.

But wait here a second, Bliss—

He looked deep into me and I felt a tremor. Sir? I said.

His eyes became sad as he hesitated, then:

Now dont think this is going to become a habit, Bliss. I know you're going to like being in there looking in the dark, even though you have to climb up those filthy pissy stairs to get there. Oh yes, you're going to enjoy looking at the pictures just about like I used to enjoy being up there on the bandstand playing music for folks to enjoy

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Callaloo 18.2 (1995) 263-271

themselves back there in my olden days. Yes, you're going to like looking at the pictures, most likely you're going to be bugeyed with the excitement; but I'm telling you right now that it's one of those pleasures we preachers have to leave to other folks. And I'll tell you why, little preacher: too much looking at those pictures is going to have a lot of folks raising a crop of confusion. The show hasn't been here but a short while but I can see it coming already. Because folks are getting themselves mixed up with those shadows spread out against the wall, with people that are no more than some smoke drifting up from hell or pouring out of a bottle. So they lose touch with who they're supposed to be, Bliss. They forget to be what the Book tells them they were meant to be—and that's in God's *own* image. The preacher's job, his main job, Bliss, is to help folks find themselves and to keep reminding them to remember who they are. So you see, those pictures can go against our purpose. If they look at those shows too often they'll get all mixed up with so many of those shadows that they'll lose their way. They won't know who they *are* is what I mean. So you see, if we start going to the picture-show all the time, folks will think we're going to the devil and backsliding from what we preach. We have to set them an example, Bliss; so we're going in there for the first and last time—

Now don't look at me like that; I know it seems like everytime a preacher turns around he has to give up something else. But, Bliss, there's a benefit in it too; because pretty soon he develops control over himself. *Self-control's* the word. That's right, you develop discipline, and you live so you can feel the grain of things and you learn to taste the sweet that's in the bitter and you live more deeply and earnestly. A man doesn't live just one life, Bliss, he lives more lives than a cat—only he doesn't like to face it because the bitter is there nine times nine, right along with the sweet he wants all the time. So he forgets.

You too, Daddy Hickman? I said, Do you have more than one life?

He smiled down at me.

Me too, Bliss, he said. Me too.

But how? How can they have nine lives and not know it?

They forget and wander on, Bliss. But let's us leave this now and go face up to those shadows. Maybe the Master meant for them to show us some of the many sides of the old good-bad. I know, Bliss, you don't understand that, but you will, boy, you will. . . .

* * * * *

Ah, but by then Body had brought the news:

We were sitting on the porch-edge eating peanuts, gobberpeas, as Deacon Wilhite called them. Discarded hulls littered the ground below the contented dangling of our feet. We were barefoot, I was allowed to be that day, and in overalls. A flock of sparrows rested on the strands of electric wire across the unpaved road, darting down from time to time and sending up little clouds of dust. Body was humming as he chewed. Except in church we were always together, he was my right hand. Body said,

Bliss, you see that thing they all talking about?

Who, I said.

All the kids. You see it yet?

Seen what, Body. Why do you always start preaching before you state your text?

You the preacher, aint you? Look like to me a preacher'd *know* what a man is talking about.

I looked at him hard and he grinned, trying to keep his face straight.

You ought to know where all the words come from, even before anybody starts to talk. Preachers is suppose to see visions and things, aint they?

Now dont start playing around with God's work, I warned him. Like Daddy Hickman says, Everybody has to die and pay their bills—Have I seen what?

That thing Sammy Leaderman's got to play with. It makes pictures.

No, I haven't. You mean a kodak? I've seen one of those. Daddy Hickman has him a big one. Made like a box with little pearly glass windows in it and one round one, like an eye.

He shook his head. I put down the peanuts and fitted my fingers together. I said,

Here's the roof,

Here's the steeple,

Open it up and see

the people.

Body sneered. That steeple's got dirt under the finger nails, why dont you wash your hands? You think I'm a baby? Lots of folks have those kodaks, this here is something different.

Well, what is it then?

I dont rightly know, he said. I just heard some guys talking about it down at the liberty stable. But they was white and I didn't want to ask them any questions. I rather be ignorant than ask them anything.

So why didn't you ask Sammy, he aint white.

Naw, he a Jew; but he looks white, and sometimes he acts white too. Specially when he's with some of those white guys.

He always talks to me, I said, calls me *rabbi*.

The doubt came into Body's eyes like a thin cloud. He frowned. He was my right hand and I could feel his doubt.

You look white too, Rev. Why you let him call you 'rabbit'?

I looked away, toward the dusting birds.

Body, can't you hear? I said he calls me *rabbi*.

Oh, it sounds like my little brother trying to spell rabbit. Re-abbi-tee, *rabbit*, he say. He a fool, man.

He sure is, he's your brother, aint he?

Dont start that now, you a preacher, remember? How come you let Sammy play the Dozens with you, you want to be white?

No! And Sammy aint white and that's not playing the Dozens, it means preacher in Jewish talk. Quit acting a fool. What kind of toy is this you heard them talking about?

His lids came down low and his eyes hid when I tried to look for the truth in them.
 All I know is that it makes pictures, Body said.
 It makes pictures and not a kodak?
 That's right, Rev.

I chewed a while and thought of all I had heard about, airplanes and Stutz Bearcats and Stanley Steamers. Then I thought I had it:

It makes pictures but not a kodak? So maybe he's got hold to one of those big ones like they use to take your picture at the circus. You know, the kind they take you out of wet and you have to wait around until you dry.

Body shook his head, No, Rev. this here is something different. This is something they say you have to be in the dark to see. These folks come out already dry.

You mean a nickleodeon? I heard them talking about one of those when we were out there preaching in Denver.

I dont think so, Rev, but maybe that's what they meant. But, man, how's Sammy going to get something like that just to play with. A thing like that must cost about a zillion dollars.

I dont know, I said. But remember, his pappa has that grocery store. Besides, Sammy's so smart he might've made him one, man.

That's right, he a Jew, aint he? He talk much of that Jew Talk to you, Bliss?

No, how could he when I can't talk back? I wish I could, though, cause they're real nice to you, man.

How you know if you caint talk it?

Because once when Daddy Hickman took me with him to preach out there in Tulsa and we got broke he ran into one of his Pullman porter friends from Kansas City and told him about it, and this porter took us to one of those big stores run by some Jews—a real fancy one, man—and the minute we stepped through the door those Jews left everything and came gathering round Daddy Hickman's friend to hear him talk some Jewish . . .

He was colored and could talk their talk?

That's right, man . . .

Body doubted me. How'd he learn to do that, he go to Jew School?

He was raised with them, Daddy Hickman said. And he used to work for some up there in Kansas City. Daddy Hickman said they used to let him run the store on Saturday. He was the boss then, man; with all the other folks working under him. Imagine that, Body, being the *boss*.

Yeah, but what happened on Monday?

He went back to being just the porter.

So why'd he do it? That dont make much sense.

I know but Daddy Hickman said he went to running on the road because he couldn't stand pushing that broom on Monday after handling all that cash on Saturday.

I dont blame him, cause that musta been like a man being made monitor of the class in the morning, he can bet a fat man against a biscuit that one of those big guys will knock a hicky on his head after school is out—So what happened?

Well, Daddy Hickman's friend laughed and talked with those Jews and they liked

him so well that when he told him that we needed some money to get back home with, they took up a collection for us. We walked out of there with fifty dollars, man. And they even gave me a couple of new bow ties to preach in.

Honest, Bliss?

Honest, man. Those Jews was crazy about that porter. You'd have thought he was the prodigal son. Here, eat some of these goobers.

Wonder what he said to talk them out of all that money, Body said. He know something bad on them?

There you go thinking evil, I said. They were happy to be talking with somebody different, I guess.

Body shook his head. That porter sure was smart, talking those Jews out of that money. I like to learn how to do that, I *never* be out of candy change.

Those Jews were helping out with the Lord's work, fool. I wish you would remember some more about that box. It's probably just a magic lantern—except in those the pictures dont move.

I hulled seven peanuts and chewed them, trying to imagine what Body had heard while his voice flowed on about the Jews. Somehow I seemed to remember Daddy Hickman describing something similar but it kept sliding away from me, like when you bob for apples floating in a tub.

Say, Rev, Body said.

Can't you hear? I said do you remember in the Bible where it tells about Samson and it says he had him a boy to lead him up to the wall so he could shake the building down?

That's right, I said.

Well answer me this, you think that little boy got killed?

Killed, I said; who killed him?

What I mean is, do you think old Samson forgot to tell that boy what he was fixing to do?

I cut my eyes over at Body. I didn't like the idea. Once Daddy Hickman had said: Bliss, you must be a hero just like that little lad who led blind Samson to the wall, because a great many grown folks are blind and have to be led toward the light. . . . The question worried me and I pushed it away.

Look, Body, I said, I truly dont feel like working today. Because, you see, while you're out playing cowboy and acting the fool and going on cotton picks and chunking rocks at the other guys and things like that, I have to always be preaching and praying and studying my Bible. . . .

What's all that got to do with what I asked you? You want somebody to cry for you?

No, but right now it looks to you like we just eating these here good goobers and talking together and watching those sparrows out there beating up dust in the road—I'm really resting from my pastorial duties, understand? So now I just want to think some more about this box that Sammy Leaderman's supposed to have. How did those white guys say it looked?

Man, Body said, you just like a bulldog with a bone when you start in to thinking about something. I done told you, they say Sammy got him a machine that has people in it . . .

People in it? Watch out there, Body . . .

Sho, Rev—folks. They say he points it at the wall and stands back in the dark cranking on a handle and they come out and move around. Just like a gang of ghosts, man.

Seeing me shake my head, his face lit up, his eyes shining.

Body, you expect me to believe that?

Now listen here, Bliss; I had done left that box because I wanted to talk about Samson and you didn't want to. So dont come trying to call me no lie . . .

Forget about Samson, man. Where does he have this thing?

In his daddy's basement under the grocery store. You got a nickle?

I looked far down the street, past the chinaberry trees. Some little kids were pushing a big one on a racer made out of a board and some baby buggy wheels. He was guiding it with a rope like a team of horses, with them drawn all up in a knot, pushing him. I said:

Man, we ought to go somewhere and roast these gopperpeas. That would make them even better. Maybe Sister Judson would do it for us. She makes some fine fried pies too and she just might be baking today. I have to remember to pray for her tonight, she's a nice lady. What's a nickle got to do with it?

Cause Sammy charges you two cents to see them come out and move.

I looked at him. Body had a round face with laughing eyes and was smooth black, a head taller than me and very strong. He saw me doubting and grinned.

They *move*, man. I swear on my grandmother that they move. And that aint all: they walk and talk—only you cant hear what they say—and they dance and fist-fight and shoot and stab one another; and sometimes they even kiss, but not too much. And they drink liquor, man, and go staggering all around.

They sound like folks, all right, I said.

Sho, and they ride hosses and fight some Indians and all stuff like that. It's real nice, Bliss. They say it's really keen.

I willed to believe him. I said: And they all come out of this box?

That's right, Rev.

How big are the people he has in there, they midgets?

Well, it's a box about this size . . .

Now I *know* you're lying. . . . I said, Body?

What?

You know lying is a sin, dont you? You surely ought to by now, because I've told you often enough.

He looked at me then cut his eyes away, scowling. Listen, Bliss, a little while ago you wouldn't tell me whether that boy who led Samson got killed or not, so now dont come preaching me no sermon. Cause you know I can kick your butt. I dont have to take no stuff off you. This here aint no Sunday, no how. Cant nobody make me go to church on no Friday, cause on a Friday I'm liable to boot a preacher's behind until his nose bleeds.

I rebuked him with my face but now he was out to tease me.

That's the truth, Rev, and you know the truth is what the Lord loves. I'll give a doggone preacher *hell* on a Friday. Let him catch me on Sunday if he wants to, that's

all right providing he aint too long-winded. And even on Wednesday aint so bad, but please, *please*, dont let him fool with me on no Friday.

I flipped a goober at his boasting head. He didn't dodge and tried to stare me down. Then we dueled with our faces, our eyes, but I won when his lips quivered and he laughed.

Rev, he said, shaking his head, I swear you're my ace buddy, preacher or no—but why do preachers always have to be so serious? Look at that face! Let's see how you look when you see one of those outrageous sinners. One of those midnight rambling, whiskey drinking gamblers. . . .

I rebuked him with my eyes, but he kept on laughing. Come on, Rev, let's see you . . .

I've told you now, Body . . .

Man, you too serious. But I'm not lying about that box though, honest. It's suppose to be about this size, but when they come out on the wall they git as big as grown folks—Hecks, *bigger*. It's magic, man.

It must be, I said. What kind of folks has he got in that box? You might as well tell a really big lie.

White folks, man. What you think—Well, he *has* got a few Indians in there. That is if any of them are left after they're supposed to have been killed.

No colored?

Naw, just white. You know they gon' keep all the new things for theyselves. They put us in there about the time it's fixing to wear out.

We giggled, holding one hand across our mouths and slapping our thighs with the other as grown men did when a joke was outrageously simpleminded and yet somehow true.

Then that's got to be magic, I said. Because that's the only way they can get rid of the colored. But really, Body, dont you ever tell the truth?

Sure I do, all the time. I know you think I'm lying, Rev, but I'm telling you the Lord's truth. Sammy got them folks in that machine like lightning bugs in a jug.

And about how many you think he's got in there?

He held his head to one side and squinted,

About two hundred, man; maybe more.

And you think I'm going to believe that too?

It's true, man. He got them jugged in there and for four cents me and you can go see him let 'em come out and move. You can see for yourself. You got four cents?

Sure, but I'm saving 'em. You have to tell a better lie than that to get my money; a preacher's money comes hard.

Shucks, that's what you say. All y'all do is hoop and holler a while, then you pass the plate. But that's all right, you can keep your old money if you want to be so stingy, because I seen it a coupla times all ready.

You saw it? So why're you just now telling me?

I felt betrayed, Body was of my right hand. I saw him skeet through the liar's gap in his front teeth and roll his eyes.

Shoots, you dont believe nothing I say no how. I get tired of you 'sputing my word. But just the same I'm telling the truth; they come out and move and they move fast.

Not like ordinary folks. And last time I was down there Sammy made them folks come out big, man. They was twice as big as grown folks, and they had a whole train with them . . .

A whole train?

Sho, a real train running over a trestle just like the Southern does. And some cowboys was chasing it on they hosses.

Body, I'm going to pray for you, hear? Fact is, I'm going to have Daddy Hickman have the whole church pray for you.

Dont you think you're so good, Bliss. You better ask him to pray for yourself while you doing it, cause you believe nothing anybody says. Shucks, I'm going home.

Now dont get mad—hey, wait a minute, Body. Come back here, where you going? Come on back. *Please*. Body. Caint you hear me say "please." But now the dust was spurting behind his running feet. I was sad, he was of my right hand.

* * * * *

So now I wanted to say, No, Daddy Hickman; if that's the way it has to be, let's not go. Because it was one more thing I'd have to deny myself because of being a preacher, and I didn't want the added yearning. Better to listen to the others telling the stories, as I had for some time now, since Body had brought the news and the movies had come to town. Better to listen while sitting on the curb stones in the evening, or watching them acting out the parts during recess and lunchtime on the school grounds. Any noontime I could watch them reliving the stories and the magic gestures and see the flickery scenes unreeling inside my eye just as Daddy Hickman could make people relive the action of the Word. And seeing them, I could feel myself drawn into the world they shared so intensely that I felt that I had actually taken part not only in the seeing, but in the actions unfolding in the depths of the wall I'd never seen; experiencing with the excruciating intensity a camel would feel if drawn through the eye of a needle a whole world uncoiling through an eye of glass.

So Daddy Hickman was too late, already the landscape of my mind had been trampled by the great droves of galloping horses and charging redskins and the yelling charges of cowboys and calvarymen, and I had reeled before exploding faces that imprinted themselves upon one's eyeball with the impact of a water-soaked snowball bursting against the tender membrane to leave a felt-image of blue-white pain throbbing with every pulse of blood propelled toward vision. And I had sat dizzy with the vastness of the action and the scale of the characters and the dimensions of the emotions and responses; had seen laughs so large and villainous with such rotting, tombstone teeth in mouths so cavernous that they seemed to yawn wall-wide and threaten to gulp the whole audience into their traps of hilarious maliciousness. And meanness transcendent, yawning in one overwhelming face; and heroic goodness expressed in actions as cleanly violent as a cyclone seen from a distance, rising ever above the devilish tricks of the badguys, and the women's eyes looking ever wider with horror or welling ever limpid with love, shocked with surprise over some bashful movement of the hero's lips, his ocean waves of hair, his heaving chest and anguished eyes. Or determined with womanly virtue to escape the badguy and

escaping in the panting end with the goodguy's shy help; escaping even the Indian chief's dark clutches even as I cowered in my seat beneath his pony's flying hooves, surviving to see her looking with wall-wide head and yard-wide smiling mouth melting with the hero's to fade into the darkness sibilant with women's and young girls' sighs.

Or the trains running wild and threatening to jump the track and crash into the white sections below, with smoke and steam threatening to scald the air and bring hell fire to those trapped there in their favored seats—screaming as fireman and engineer battled to the death with the Devil now become a Dalton boy or a James or a Younger, and whose horses of devil flesh outran again and again the iron horses of the trains, upgrade and down, and with their bullets flying to burst ever against the sacred sanctuary of Uncle Sam's mail cars, where the gold was stored and the hero waited; killing multitudes of clerks and passengers, armed and unarmed alike, in joy and in anger, in fear and in fun. And bushwhacking the Sheriff and his deputies again and again, dropping them over cliffs and into cascading waterfalls, until like the sun the Hero loomed and doomed the arch-villain to join his victims, tossed too from a cliff, shot in the belly with the blood flowing dark; or hung blackhooded with his men, three in a row, to drop from a common scaffold to swing like sawdust filled dolls in lonely winds.

All whirled through my mind as filtered through Body's and the other's eyes and made concrete in their shouting pantomime of conflict, their accurately aimed pistol and rifle blasts, their dying falls with faces fixed in death's most dramatic agony as their imaginary sixshooters blazed one last poetic bullet of banging justice to bring their murderers down down down to hell, now heaving heaven high in wonder beneath our feet. . . .

So I wanted to leave the place unentered, even if it had a steeple higher than any church in the world, leave it, pass it ever by, rather than see it once, then never to enter it again—with all the countless unseen episodes to remain a mystery and like my mother flown forever.

But I could not say it, nor could I refuse; for no language existed between child and man. So I, Bliss the preacher, ascended, climbed, holding reluctantly Daddy Hickman's huge hand, climbed up the steep, narrow stairs crackling with peanut hulls and discarded candy wrappers—up into the hot, breathing darkness, up, until the roof seemed to rest upon the crowns of our heads. . . . And as we come into the pink-tinted light with its tiered, hierarchial order of seats, I pull back upon his hand, frightened by what I do not know. And he says, Come along, Bliss boy—deep and comforting in the dark. It's all right, he says, I'm going with you. You just hold my hand.

And I ascended, holding on.